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ABSTRACT

Since 1985, freshman entering the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, have embarked on a 3-day outdoor adventure program as part of their orientation experience prior to their first semester. Most of the 700-800 freshmen entering the university participate in the program titled "Passages." While half of the group is on Passages, the other half remains on campus, engaged in academic advising, registration, and a seminar on writing, reading, and critical thinking. Then the groups switch. About 20 percent of the students choose to go backpacking, while the remaining students select a base-camp experience for their Passages experience. Upperclassmen that serve as Passages leaders receive leadership training for 3 months. Training sessions cover the goals of the program, how to lead group discussions and handle various problems, conservation and environmental ethics, first aid, and CPR. Freshmen evaluations of the program indicate that the experience increases self-sufficiency and helps develop a sense of community among the students. There has been a significantly higher rate of freshman-to-sophomore retention and a lower rate of academic probation at the end of the freshman year since Passages began, compared to previous years. The program also has a significant positive impact on student leaders. An appendix outlines program activities. (KS)

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PASSAGES: HELPING COLLEGE STUDENTS MATRICULATE THROUGH OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

by

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ABSTRACT:

Since 1985, freshmen entering the University of Puget Sound have embarked on a three-day outdoor adventure program as part of their orientation experience during the week prior to the beginning of their Fall semester. In 1987, the "Passages" program, as it is called, was awarded best orientation program in the country by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

Introduction

For several years the University of Puget Sound Counseling Center had offered five-day backpacking trips in the Cascades and Olympic Mountains to incoming freshmen as an optional supplement to the freshman orientation week conducted just prior to the start of Fall semester classes. Up to 20 students, in two groups, could be accommodated on these trips.

The purposes of these pre-orientation outings included opportunities for new freshmen to meet others with a common interest in the outdoors, and thereby to develop a peer support group; to become familiar with the outdoor environment of the Pacific Northwest; and to be able to apply increases in self-confidence or sense of competence experienced on the outing to meeting the academic and social demands of college. Evening group discussions would typically involve facilitation of what participants were learning about themselves, each other and the wilderness environment, and how they could apply this to situations in their lives beyond the outing. At one such discussion, a student commented on how much of a struggle it had been for him to reach the top of a mountain pass that day, and that initially he had seen this as not accomplishable. But then it occurred to him

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how many other things he tells himself are beyond his reach and which he therefore, does not attempt. "If I could climb this mountain," he said, "I can probably do a lot of other things I have been telling myself I can't do."

When these 20 backpackers came back to campus, they acted much differently than other freshmen who were now just arriving for orientation week. Those who had been on a five-day outing already had friends and felt comfortable in their new home. We would see many of these people still actively associating with each other two years later.

It was these kinds of outcomes that led us to consider offering this intensive, high-adventure outdoor experience to all new freshmen. Other factors included the university's commitment to more effectively address two of the most prevalent concerns of freshmen -- making early and meaningful connections with other people (students, faculty and staff) on campus, and developing confidence in their ability to do college work.

Specifics of Passages

After over a year of logistical planning, leadership training and problem solving, the first Passages program was launched in August, 1985. The program continues with some slight modifications, but retains most of its original structure.

All but about 100 of the approximately 700 to 800 freshmen entering the university each Fall participate in Passages. This group is divided in half -- a "green" group and a "gold" group, the school colors. While one group is on Passages for three days, the other group remains on campus, engaged in academic advising, registration, and a two day seminar on writing, reading and critical thinking called "Prelude." At the midpoint, the groups switch.

In early summer, freshmen are sent information about the orientation program, and asked to choose between two Passages experiences -- a small group backpacking trip in the Olympic Mountains, or a base camp experience at a large Boy Scout camp the university rents in the Olympic foothills on Puget Sound. Typically, about 20 percent choose to go backpacking; these students can choose a beginning, moderate or advanced trip, based on mileage, terrain and elevation gain. Backpacking groups consist of up to ten freshmen with two leaders, and include group discussions about personal goals and college expectations during their three days and two nights on the trail. The backpackers join with their classmates at the base camp for either a

first-night or a final evening dinner and campfire program.

Those choosing the base camp experience participate in a wide variety of reflective, educational, recreational and community-building activities. Twice each day each freshman gathers with ten or so others and a student leader in a "home base" group, a modification introduced in 1988. The purpose of the home base groups is to bring the large base camp experience down to a more human and comfortable scale, and to engage freshmen in some discussion and team-building experiences that provide a sense of commonality among the entire class. (See Appendix A for more information about home base group activities). Morning workshops on topics such as meditation, nature photography and questions about college are led by student leaders, faculty and staff. In addition, freshmen at the base camp have the option of going on dayhikes in the Olympics, canoeing, sailing and rowboating on the Sound, or volleyball and other camp activities.

Evening campfire programs emphasize the togetherness among freshmen, upperclassmen, faculty and staff in the University of Puget Sound community, and invite students to make connections between their Passages experience and the academic venture upon which they are about to embark.

Leadership

Recruitment for Passages leaders begins in early February. We have been successful in attracting up to 100 qualified upperclassmen applicants for the 50 or so leader positions available each year. ABout half of these are returning, or "veteran" leaders. These people are paid a small stipend for their involvement in the program.

During the next three months, leadership training sessions cover the goals of the program, how to lead group discussions and handle various problems, conservation and environmental ethics, first aid and CPR. A good deal of community building goes on among leaders, partly to develop an espirit de corps among this group and to model what they will need to do with freshmen on Passages. This phase of the training program also includes an overnight field trip to the base camp and, for backpacking leaders, a weekend backpacking trip in the Olympic Mountains. These field trips have also been useful for additional skill-building and for discussions about how to handle various problems that might be encountered among freshmen, such as shyness or uncooperativeness. A few days before Passages begins in

August, leaders return for final training in group dynamics, wilderness medicine and emergency procedures.

Impact, Evaluation and Outcome

Passages seems to impact freshmen in a variety of ways. The backpackers, having functioned self-sufficiently for three days, typically return as a tightknit, enthusiastic group. One backpacker said he learned that "I could hike 14 miles in the wilderness with 10 people I had never met, and get to know and appreciate each one's individuality. I now have special memories of meeting new friends at UPS, memories that are building blocks for a new beginning."

In the base camp, the experience of interacting with 150 to 300 other freshmen, upperclassmen, faculty and staff gives students a breadth of experiences--friendships form and a sense of community develops. One base camp participant summarized the experience of many in stating, "The Passages program really made a difference in the way I accepted UPS. I met people that I wouldn't have gotten a chance to meet on campus, and they are still my close friends. The outdoors has the ability to bring people closer on a one-to-one level."

In written evaluations which freshmen completed at the end of the 1988 Passages Program, the following data emerged (1 = low, 5 = high):

Effectiveness of Passages in helping freshmen meet:

	other freshmen	4.62
	upperclassmen	3.85
	faculty/staff	3.60
Leaders:	competence	4.56
	judgement	4.53
	helpful/supportive	4.74
	friendliness	4.77
Backpacking trip:		4.83

97% said they think Passages would be a valuable component of next year's orientation program.

Some comments from freshmen at the conclusion of Passages were:

"Meeting new people really helps and will help in getting along in the year to come."

"I had to struggle to make it up some steep hills, but when I reached the top I felt elated. There will be a lot of steep hills to climb at college, too, but when I reach the top I will be happy."

"The most valuable aspect of Passages was meeting people, getting up in the mountains, breathing the air, seeing the view, and realizing that if I can climb a mountain I can do anything!!"

Further compelling evidence of the success of the Passages program comes from statistics that show a significantly higher rate of freshman-to-sophomore retention and a lower rate of academic probation at the end of the freshman year since Passages began, compared to previous years. Although it cannot necessarily be concluded that Passages deserves all the credit for this, it does suggest that this intensive outdoor experience helped freshmen feel more a part of the university community, an important factor for retention, and that, perhaps, students were able to more easily realize academic success as the result of personal and social successes on Passages.

One final note: we have found the program also has a significant impact on the 50 to 60 student leaders. These sophomores, juniors and seniors are given a great deal of responsibility. Indeed, the success of the program rests on their shoulders. As a result, we find leaders reporting impacts of the program on themselves ranging from, "I was able to overcome my shyness in speaking in front of a group," to "Being a Passages leader has been the most important part of college to me so far.

Appendix A

Passages 1988
Home Base Group Meetings
(Information for Leaders)

The purpose of the home base groups is to bring the large Base Camp experience (with over 300 per session) down to a more human and comfortable scale. Two leaders and 8 to 12 freshmen will comprise a group. Although all groups will be developing their own identity and discussing ideas as they arise, it is important that some activities and general emphasis be common to all groups, so that a sense of commonality and community arise out of shared experiences begins to develop among the entire freshmen class.

Suggested activities for home base group meetings are as follows:

Day 1 (Sunday 8/21 and Wednesday 8/24)

3:45 First Meeting

1. Getting acquainted exercise. Suggestions.

   a. Interviews - pair up with someone you don't know yet; interview each other for 2-4 minutes, find out at least 2 unique things about your partner; come back into large group, introduce your partner to the group (leaders participate, pairing with freshmen).

   b. Backward name - each person takes his/her first name, spells it backwards, says new name to him/herself. Then introduce self with new name in as seductive a manner as possible.

   c. Objects of nature - each person finds a natural object (stone, leaf, twig, etc.) they would be most able to identify with; come back into the circle; introduce yourself (name) and describe why you introduce with your natural object.

2. Explain purposes of Passages - making growth-enhancing choices (i.e. meeting other people), taking initiative -- these are things helpful for success in college. Also, introducing you to the Puget Sound community. Invite questions or comments about this.

3. Camp tour, stopping to pick up equipment rental.

4. Reminder - bring journals and pen to home base group meeting at 8:00 tonight. Set up place to meet.

8:00 Second Meeting

1. Commitment bands and discussion - each person gets a piece of yarn to tie around their wrist; this represents/is a symbol for something they want to get out of Passages. Suggest that they think about how they can use their Passages experience to help them in the first semester of college, or think about a new behavior you want to try out here (i.e. meeting five new people to develop friendships with). Then, each person makes a statement about their goals or commitment (possibly preceded by writing this in their individual journals - see below). finally, focus the discussion on how the group, or individuals in the group, might help each other achieve their goals at Passages and beyond; also commonalities that may have emerged.

2. Individual journals - introduce journal idea by mentioning that people are encouraged to write goals, impressions, feelings, quotes, etc. throughout Passages and beyond. Bring journals to all group meetings. Suggested first journal topic - goals and commitment to yourself for Passages; what help you can use from others and what you can give to others to help them achieve their goals.

3. Group journal - mention that there is also a journal for the group (show it) which will be available at all home base group meetings, during meal times from leader, and (possibly) at the Program Office at other times. Come up with a group name, design, logo, or slogan (as a group) to put on the cover of the group journal to personalize it. Any group member

can write impressions, meaningful or funny things said in the group, etc. in the journal. At mealtimes, a group may read a Passage from their group journal.

4. Closing activity suggestions -
   - Human knots: an exercise in problem solving
   - Trust fall
   - Group back rubs
   - Group hug

5. Reminders
   - Home base group meeting tomorrow at 9:00 a.m.
   - Optional chapel service at 10:30 tonight at Met Jr.
   - See if anyone wants to read from the group journal at a meal tomorrow
   - Campfire - now, at Campfire Point.

Day 2 (Monday 8/22 and Thursday 8/25)

9:00 A.M. Third Meeting

1. Announcements
   - What's happening today

2. Questions?

3. Individual and group journal-writing time

4. Reminders
   - Next home base group meeting tonight at 8:00
   - Group journal reading at lunch or dinner today?

8:00 P.M. Fourth Meeting

1. Open discussion - suggestions:
   - How are things going? How are you feeling?
   - What did you learn form/teach someone today?
   - How are the goals you stated for yourselves yesterday being achieved? Are any modifications necessary?
   - Comments about workshops or dayhikes--i.e. what did you learn that could be helpful in college?

2. Green session: discuss Prelude a bit, what they will be doing. In individual journals, ask them to write about their anticipations, expectations, questions regarding Prelude.

   Gold session: discuss, "What do you want to know about college -- questions, resources, anxieties, etc."
   Write about this in individual journals.

3. Group journal-writing time.

4. Group poem (optional) - on a piece of paper, one person writes the first 2 lines of a poem, then folds the paper so only the second line is visible, and passes it to the next person who writes 2 more lines and so on. After last person writes 2 lines, read entire poem in the group.

5. Reminders
   Tonight's activities - hoedown, films for thought, optional chapel service
   Group journal/group poem readings at meals tomorrow?

Day 3 (Tuesday 8/24 and Friday 8/26)

9:00 Fifth Meeting

1. Announcements
   What's happening today

2. Questions

3. Individual and group journal-writing time

4. Reminders
   Next home base group meeting at 7:00 tonight
   Group journal reading at lunch today?
   Group representative to share at campfire? -
   - relationship of your Passages experience to life in college
   - a symbolic gift to give to the freshmen class

7:00 Sixth Meeting

1. Open discussion - suggestions:

   How you feel now -- about Passages, entering college -- compared to how you felt when you first arrived at Passages?

   How have the goals/commitments you first stated been achieved or not achieved? What do you need to do from here to continue working on these?

2. Letter to self - hand out paper and envelopes; have students write their name and campus address on envelope. Then write a letter to self, which will be mailed out later Fall semester. Include impressions, anticipations, expectations of college.

3. Commitment bands, closing - everyone removes their commitment bands from their wrist and places band in center of circle. Return to form circle. Then each person returns to center and removes a band different from the one he/she placed in there. This symbolizes a gift received from the group. Share and discuss.

4. Closing suggestion -
   Group hug
   Commitment of time to get together first or second week of classes.

5. Group proceeds to Campfire Point.